

**See Government Grow: Education Politics from
Johnson to Reagan**

Gareth Davies

Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2007, 387 pp.

Only a dozen years ago, the Republican Party platform called for abolition of the U.S. Department of Education. Perhaps a holdover from what many thought would be a government-leveling tidal wave when the GOP won control of both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate in 1994, the 1996 platform declared that “the federal government has no constitutional authority to be involved in school curricula. . . . That is why we will abolish the Department of Education, end federal meddling in our schools, and promote family choice at all levels of learning.”

Only six years after that platform was adopted, passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—an initiative championed by George W. Bush throughout his presidential campaign and the deepest federal foray ever into American education—proved that the GOP reformist zeal was dead; only 33 House and 3 Senate Republicans voted against the measure. The 1994 Republican revolution had not only fizzled, but the GOP had become the standard-bearer for expanding federal power in education.

So what insight does *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan*, which covers very little history after the Reagan administration, offer into why we went so quickly from the 1994 revolution to NCLB? It turns out, a lot. In examining Washington's entrenchment in elementary and secondary education from its start in the Johnson administration, acceptance under presidents Nixon and Ford, and survival of the Reagan Revolution—the first revolution that was supposed to doom it—Oxford University historian Gareth Davies explores timeless political realities that make it almost impossible to pull Washington out of the schools.

Before determining how the federal government has stayed in education one needs to know how it got involved in the first place. It's a somewhat remarkable occurrence, actually, since the Constitution gives Washington no explicit power over education, and for much of American history schooling was almost exclusively a local and family affair.

The road to federal involvement was a slow one. For more than a century before passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, power over education had been steadily centralizing, with larger school districts and proliferation of state compulsory attendance laws. The barrier against federal involvement in K–12 education was breached in 1917 with the Smith-Hughes Act, which provided federal funding for vocational education. It crumbled a little more in 1950 with creation of “impact aid” for districts housing federal installations, and disintegrated even further with the National Defense Education Act in 1958, which in response to national hysteria over the October 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik provided, among other things, federal funds to states to improve mathematics, science, and foreign language instruction.

Despite this creeping centralization, it was not until passage of the ESEA that the federal government thrust itself broadly into K–12 education without making any connection to national defense.

Davies chalks the ESEA's passage up to two major factors. First, Congress moved left in 1964 as the Democrats obtained more than a two-thirds majority in both houses. Second, Congress crafted a law that defused long-standing tensions between Roman Catholic leaders and the National Education Association by offering federal help to all qualified students, but not giving it directly to parochial schools.

As interesting as the buildup to the ESEA and its ultimate passage are, they are not Davies's primary interest. He seeks to explain how federal involvement in K-12 education survived after enthusiasm for the Great Society had waned and Republicans had taken control of the White House.

Davies's first four chapters examine ESEA's passage, the law "putting down roots" through the end of the Johnson administration, and the Nixon and Ford years when, one might presume, the White House would have tried to end Washington's foray into education. Ultimately, concludes Davies, the ESEA survived despite little evidence it did any academic good, and constant efforts by Nixon and Ford to cut federal education spending, because once created, ESEA programs developed constituencies that fought for them, and because few politicians, including Republicans, wanted to appear "anti-education":

Here, the explanation is straightforward, located in the routine operations of American democracy that make it hard to dismantle any federal program, once that program has acquired a constituency, and once that constituency has learned how to exploit the structure and process of American government to its advantage. Part of the explanation also has to do with the way Americans have always tended to idealize education, seeing in public schools an almost magical mechanism for equalizing opportunities between individuals, without greatly redistributing income. That idea transcends differences between liberals and conservatives and is unlikely ever to be displaced by evidence that schools cannot, in fact, compensate for social inequality [p. 280].

But what about the early 1980s, the subject of Davies's final chapter, when Ronald Reagan and a Republican majority in the Senate were swept into office promising to radically shrink the federal government and eliminate the U.S. Department of Education? Davies makes clear that even in 1981, Reagan's most successful government-

shrinking year, he could never totally overcome either the power of special interests or Republican desires not to appear anti-education. Reagan was able to get a 10 percent cut in education spending through Congress and to consolidate many of the small, categorical programs that helped to cement federal education constituencies, but he had initially sought a 25 percent reduction and was unable to do all the consolidation he would have liked. And it was not only Democrats who opposed him:

OMB struggled hard to preserve its proposed cuts in something resembling their original form but was forced by implacable Republican opposition to yield. One crucial moment came when William Goodling (R-Pa.), a respected member of the Education and Labor Committee and former school superintendent, confronted [OMB Director David] Stockman off the House floor the morning of the critical vote on Gramm-Latta. . . . He vowed to take “ten Republicans with me” in opposing it [Gramm-Latta] if Stockman did not abandon his insistence on putting the school lunch and child nutrition programs into the block grant. . . . By the time Gramm-Latta came up for a vote, the OMB education package had been entirely withdrawn [p. 256].

After 1981, Reagan’s ability to rein in federal education activities only weakened. An attempt to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education quietly failed in 1982 when many Senate Republicans refused to back the move. Education appropriations every year greatly outstripped the president’s requests, and new categorical programs appeared through the rest of Reagan’s presidency.

In all of his chapters that focus on the legislative side of education policymaking, Davies details the ins and outs of relationships among individuals who helped to shape federal education policy. These chapters are critical because they substantiate his conclusions about how and why federal education programs survived, but they tend to get bogged down a bit in storytelling. If such details are what readers want, they would do better to read Christopher T. Cross’s *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age* (2004) by an author who was an active participant in many of Washington’s education battles. Similarly, David Stockman’s *The Triumph of Politics* (1986) is a better choice for readers who want a visceral sense of the agony of a man

trying to shrink government as he battles the forces that keep government growing.

Perhaps the most unique contribution of *See Government Grow* is its middle four chapters, which show how government power crept into many areas of education without much leadership from elected officials either in Congress or the White House. Especially in the 1970s, bureaucrats, special interests, and lawyers, Davies posits, kept big government advancing in education even as the national mood seemed to be turning against expansion of government power.

Perhaps the best example of federal control growing through the actions of bureaucrats and courts, rather than legislators, was the establishment of bilingual education as a “right” for non-English speaking students. While bilingual education had some grounding in traditional legislation—the Bilingual Education Act, which provided federal funds to teach children in their native languages, was enacted in 1968—its expansion to a civil right was driven mainly by aggressive regulatory action. In 1970, the federal Office of Civil Rights required all districts that were receiving federal funds and had “more than five percent national origin-minority group children” to “rectify” language deficiencies that kept such students from “effective participation” in educational programs. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the move, ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* that while non-English speaking students had no Fourteenth Amendment right to be taught in their native languages, under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Washington could require bilingualism when federal funds were involved.

“Here, we see . . . the development of a new brand of reform politics,” Davies writes, “with its locus not in the White House, but in a congeries of unelected political actors” (p.163). Similar patterns played out in education for the disabled and fiscal equity lawsuits, to which Davies gives excellent treatments in separate chapters.

So what are we to conclude from Davies’s book? Ultimately, that the forces for expanding federal involvement in education—interest groups dependent on federal programs, politicians intent on appearing to care about children, entrepreneurial lawyers and bureaucrats—are many, while the forces arrayed to shrink government, even if strong at times, have little chance of prevailing in the long term. Events after the period explored by Davies, including the

demise of the 1994 Republican Revolution, substantiate his conclusion and leave little hope that a law like the No Child Left Behind Act, despite significant unpopularity and a poor academic track record, will create sufficiently intense public disgust that federal politicians will pull Washington out of the nation's schools.

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